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ABSTRACT

What is the difference in the stories that literary artists tell and the stories others tell? Some writers feel literary artists are able to realize the meaning of experience in a fuller way and shape their realizations into a work of fiction. Others feel that the writer does not invent the work but rather discovers it. Using fiction in communication research has been criticized because it is not real, and it cannot be proven whether it affects life or reflects it. What fiction can say depends on what metaphor is used to guide listening. The metaphor of "fiction as world" sees fiction as a unique world created by a novelist and peopled by characters living out their lives. In effect, the author makes the reader see the actual world through the new perspective offered within the world of the work. The metaphor of "fiction as case study" sees fiction as a source for detailed narratives of a given case. Authors create characters enmeshed in a fabric of social relationships living out their lives. Each metaphor suggests another way of encountering fiction for what it can suggest about communication. Fiction is another way of knowing and can suggest new ways of thinking about communication. (Fifteen references are attached.) (MG)

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HEARING THE VOICES THROUGH LITERARY WORKS

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We need to begin by reminding ourselves what is it that fiction does and how we respond to it before we consider what it can say to us about communication. Put most simply, people are storytelling animals and fiction tells stories. There is something in all of us primed to respond to the masterly stories which we call fiction.

Our drive to make sense by creating stories - to see patterns, connections, reasons, and causes - is what makes us unique as humans. Le Guin sees narrative as, "... a fundamental operation of the normal mind functioning in society" (1989, p.39). Morton sees the "narrative impulse" as common to all cultures throughout time (1983, p.2). We experience our lives as narrative, assimilating the daily lived details into our personal scripts. Every attempt to imagine what might be, to share what has been, and to make sense out of what is are stories. Robert Coles (1989), as a psychiatric resident, was urged to listen respectfully to his patients' personal stories as he would listen to any story - for plot, character, emphasis, sequence, and point of view. As his friend William Carlos Williams said, "Such a respect for narrative as everyone's rock - bottom capacity, but also as the universal gift, to be shared with others" (Coles, 1989, p.30). Fisher (1987) proposes we view humans as storytellers, *homo narrans*, and that all forms of human communication need to be interpreted from a narrative perspective.

We all tell stories, but what is the difference in the stories that literary artists tell? Walsh (1969) explains that people can only learn from experience to the degree that they are able to reflect upon it and realize what it means. Literary artists are able to realize the meaning of experience in a fuller way and shape their realizations into a work of fiction. Readers then share in their realizations.

For Milan Kundera (1986) the realization which Walsh speaks of is an act of discovery. The novelist is not a historian, nor a prophet, but an explorer of existence. Novels are concerned with the enigma of the self, and the novelist uses characters, which Kundera calls experimental selves, to explore themes of existence. The writer does not invent the work, rather discovers it. For Kundera, writing is like breaking through a wall to the work which has always existed as a human possibility.

Dillard (1982) echoes this theme. She sees the writer as the world's interpreter, who creates a simulacrum of the world as an aesthetic or epistemological probe of possibilities. The literary work serves as, "a model of previously unarticulated or unavailable relationships among ideas and materials" (Dillard, 1982, p.184).

LeGuin sees fiction as an active encounter with the environment through posing options and alternatives and also enlarging

present reality by, "... connecting it to the unverifiable past and the unpredictable future" (1989, p.45).

What are these realizations like for the reader? According to Morton (1984), fiction does two things. One, it "synchronizes feeling with event into understandable order" (Morton, 1984, p.2). The "stuff of life" is ordered, shaped, meanings heightened. Two, great novelists give "demonstration classes" to the rest of us who are busily, amateurishly creating the narrative of our own lives. Her answer to the charge that reading novels is a waste of time is, "These books are showing me ways of being I could never have managed alone. I am not killing time, I'm trying to make a life" (Morton, 1984, p.2).

Coles (1989) sees fiction as having the potential for engaging the whole person, the analytical-abstract and the emotional-responsive dimensions, and making a difference in a person's life. Having used fiction in his teaching he sees a communion develop between the writer's scrutinizing and suggestive images and the reader's thinking, remembering, wondering life. One student expresses how an author's images and sounds had become part of him. "You don't do that with theories. You don't do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story, because in a story like it says in the Bible, the word becomes flesh" (Coles, 1989, p.128). Another student speaking about "K" in The Trial, "... he might even make a difference in my life, because

he's part of what it is that's in my head that remembers and decides and is loyal to this and doesn't like something else. He is part of my mind's life" (Coles, 1989, p.129).

This, then, is what fiction does for us, and how we respond to it. It speaks to us in a form which we find natural; it presents possibilities of how to think and feel about what was, is, or might be. Sloan says we read to be absorbed in the work, not as critics to analyze and diagnose (1979, p.37). He says all great fiction tells us about us. To borrow Fay Weldon's words about what novelists do, " ... all novelists advance on the same front, leading us out of the reality we know into the altogether clearer world of the imagination" (1990, p.3).

Using fiction in communication research has been criticized because it is not real, and it cannot be proven whether it affects life or reflects it (Ulrich, 1986). Such criticism faults novels for not meeting the standards of science, while failing to understand such standards are inappropriately applied to fiction. However, neither science nor fiction deal with actual life or in truth. What we perceive as reality is a construct of our nervous systems and what we need to believe. Statistical validity within experimental situations create an illusion of certainty, but it cannot be proven that what subjects say or do corresponds to what they might do in actual life. Novels and short stories are fiction, not verbatim transcripts of

actual people, yet they create their own reality that must be believable to sustain reader interest. Science and fiction deal with different ways of knowing; each yields a different kind of information. Science deals in probabilities, while fiction deals in possibilities. What either asks, yields, or suggests and how each interacts with the other is limited only by the imagination and biases of the scholars.

Which leads us to the question of exploring what novel possibilities fiction can offer us about communication. What fiction can say depends on what metaphor we use to guide our listening. I would like to explore two possibilities: fiction as world; fiction as case study.

The fiction as world metaphor sees fiction as a unique world created by a novelist peopled by characters living out their lives. This world of the work must be accepted on its own terms by the reader who operates like a tourist in a strange land. The reader doesn't know the territory, what to expect from the natives, what is going to happen, nor what anything means. Dillard says we can ask the same questions of the world in the novel that we ask in the real world, "... we can examine an artistic world not only formally, but also culturally, morally, and metaphysically ..." (1982, p.152). Barzun with a variant on this metaphor sees a great novel as, "... a view of the universe You must get inside it to look out upon the old familiar world

with the author's unfamiliar eyes" (1954, p.137). In effect, the author makes the reader see the actual world through the new perspective offered within the world of the work. Basically, this is what empathic readers do: enter into the world of the work and make themselves at home.

This metaphor is illuminated by drawing an analogy to Goodall's use of the term "ethnographer" in his organizational research (1989). Goodall sees the organization as a culture and the researcher as an ethnographer, who functions like a participant-observer, doing fieldwork among the natives to understand the culture. A fictional work contains the author's world or culture. The reader is like an ethnographer, who is a participant-observer, trying to understand the natives and what their behavior means. Our responses to the work are our perceptions of what Walsh called the literary artist's fuller realizations, and what I called another kind of information, another way of knowing. It is a very personal journey.

What this "information" is depends on you, who you read, and what is available in the text. Many novels give the flavor of or characters's reactions to a time, a place, and an experience. We gain new insights because the events unfold within the framework of characters' perception of and reaction to them. Catch 22 gives a picture of the military mind. Morton thinks The Quiet American is the, "... most comprehensible and predictive account

of the origins of the Vietnam War (1984, p.2). Goodall thinks organizational scholars should read Kafka's The Castle and The Trial because of the picture (and critique) it gives of bureaucracy (1989, p.xxiv). Phillips thinks Irving Stone's novel about Freud, Passions of the Mind, gives a good background of the period in which he worked (1990). A personal favorite is Solzhenitsyn's The First Circle for the picture it paints of the Stalinist mind set. Think for a minute of the fictional works which have illuminated your understanding.

Other novels, which focus on strong characters and their relationships, provide "information" that develops our awareness of and sensitivity toward communication. The characters' lives resonate in us in a personal way. This personalized encounter with narrative fiction is what Coles describes (1989). His purpose was to confront issues of moral conduct with his students through fiction. The examples he gives, however, all deal with students' reactions as communicators - their interpersonal relationships, how they feel about themselves, and their worlds. Especially memorable are his descriptions of Atlanta teenagers' responses to Tillie Olsen's stories' Tell Me A Riddle "I Stand Here Ironing" which moved one black teenager to tears. He assumed the characters were white and was surprised at how much he identified with the characters, especially the daughter. "Oh Yes" was hard for one student to finish because she had been,

"... hit by all the truth ... too much truth for one evening" (Coles, 1989, p.56).

The "fiction as world" metaphor opens us up to whatever is available in the work. Each novelist has a distinctive voice with each work having its unique story to tell. Each reader's sensibilities bring a personal way of experiencing the text. People trained in communication are likely to be more attuned to the depiction of communication. By examining the world of the work, creative ways of thinking about communicating may emerge. Perceptions, insights, and questions about actual communication sparked.

The second metaphor, fiction as case study, sees fiction as a source for detailed narratives of a given case. Authors create characters enmeshed in a fabric of social relationships living out their lives. Authors are freed of the constraints of actual life, such as linear time, fixed perspective, and limited information. In particular, authors writing from an omniscient point of view do not limit readers' knowledge about a character to its behavior, self-report, or other characters' comments. Novelists writing from this viewpoint have hundreds of pages to develop the intricate complexities between the character's innermost thoughts and perceptions set against the character's interactions with other characters. However, novelists are constrained by readers' expectations for characters and action

that are believable and comprehensible. For these reasons - the sense of completeness in description of a whole life and verisimilitude - a character's life may be regarded as a fictive case history, a detailed narrative of a given case.

I examined the interpersonal communication of several main characters as fictive case histories to see what would emerge that might be useful in the study of actual interpersonal communication (Kougl, 1983). Several novels were chosen so similarities and differences among characters could be noted. All focused on a single well-developed character, were written by critically acclaimed, contemporary authors using an omniscient viewpoint and realistic, contemporary settings. The characters used were Kate Brown, in Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark, Mr. Sammler in Saul Bellows' Mr. Sammlers' Planet, and Robert Slocum in Joseph Heller's Something Happened.

The procedure involved identifying the relationships which were significant to the main character. For each of these relationships rhetorical situations were located, i.e. situations where the main character tried to accomplish some objective through talk. All talk related to the accomplishing of the objectives whether direct (dialogue) or indirect (narration) was classified according to the following headings:

Invention - any reported analysis of the other character or of a particular situation; any specification of short or long term goals with the other character; any reports about plans or strategies to accomplish the goals.

Implementation of the Plan - Any narrative of events or dialogue about events relevant to the original plan.

Assessment of Results - Reports on the outcome and what the character intends to do as a result of the outcome.

After each relationship was examined, they were analyzed collectively and a summary was written of the character's interpersonal communication. Then, the interpersonal communication styles of all three main characters were compared and contrasted.

The analysis illustrated that the communicative behavior of characters in novels can be conceptualized in rhetorical terms. A set of heuristic propositions emerged that raised questions about some of the basic assumptions about interpersonal communication. These questions suggest useful areas of inquiry in the study and understanding of actual case histories, biographies, and oral histories. These propositions and their discussion are available elsewhere (Kougl, 1983).

This fiction as case study metaphor has been applied in the teaching of the basic college course as a way of integrating concepts, theories, and experience (Smutter, 1989).

In conclusion, each metaphor suggests another way of encountering fiction for what it can suggest to us about communication. Coles (1989) says a benefit of working with stories is that they keep our conceptual categories loose or porous by suggesting other ways of viewing the world. I think this is good advice for our discipline. Fiction is another way of knowing and can suggest new ways of thinking about communication. Let me end by quoting LeGuin to remind us of fiction's value in liberalizing our ways of thinking about communication:

Only the imagination can get us out of the bind of the eternal present, inventing or hypothesizing or pretending or discovering a way that reason can then follow into the infinity of options, a clue through the labyrinths of choice ..

(1989, p.45)

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